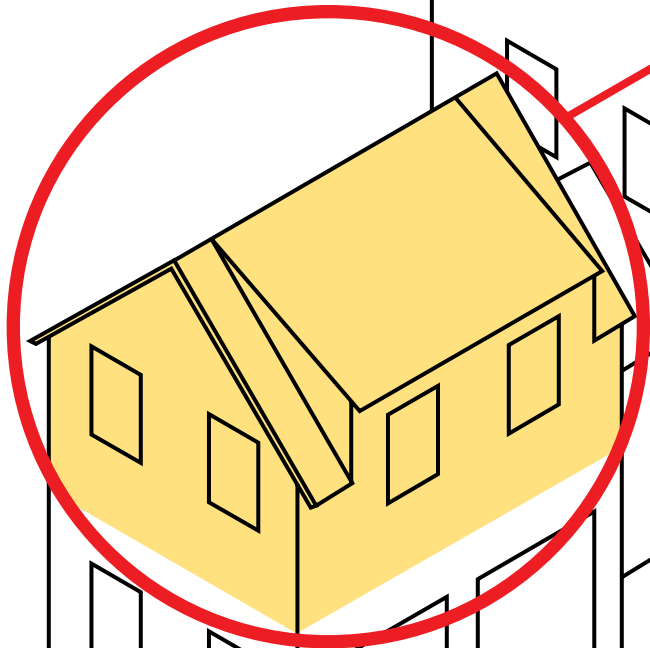


Much Ado about ADUs

BY DIANE TAYLOR



For years they have been identified by the slightly derogatory term of granny flats — small apartments that adult children might attach to their homes or install over their garages to accommodate the housing needs of an elderly female member of the family.

But these days, the architectural and social concept of the in-law apartment has been tagged with a whole new name: Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU). And it is perhaps not coincidental that the updated terminology comes with a revised and expanded definition as well.

Here in the Upper Valley in particular, the old notion of the granny flat seems to have been turned on its head. Far from being a comfy home for a frail grandmother or a doting aunt, the contemporary ADU is more often an apartment rented by a 20- or 30-something graduate student, and it is seniors who reap a surprising number of benefits when they choose to renovate their homes to include an ADU.

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Walk the Walk, Talk the Talk

As the executive director of Vital Communities — a local nonprofit that works to facilitate cooperation among the region’s commercial, residential and natural resources — it is perhaps not surprising that Len Cadwallader, along with his wife, Mary Ann, would choose to diversify their town’s housing options by adding a small apartment to their home in the quiet neighborhood on Rip Road in Hanover, N.H.

People need places to live, Len concedes. “But we can’t go on indefinitely building new constructions,” he says. “Instead, we need to make use of higher density buildings in a thoughtful manner that makes better use of existing structures.”

Mary Ann seconds that motion. Given the choice, she says, she prefers to “fill in urban spaces rather than always building further outward.”

All the same, that concern for their surroundings was not what initially prompted the Cadwalladers to renovate their home to include a one-bedroom apartment over their garage and attached to the main living area of their house. Their motivation was strictly conventional.

“We imagined it as a way for us to age in place,” explains Mary Ann. “As we grew older, we wanted to stay where we had raised our family. We envisioned a time when we would move

into the smaller apartment and someone else would live in the larger section of the house.”

That day may still come, which is why the Cadwalladers designed their ADU to allow for a lift from the garage up to the apartment. If the time comes when they can no longer climb a flight of stairs, an elevator will carry them up to their downsized living space.

For the time being, however, that

lift has yet to be installed. And the only people living in the attached apartment are a series of graduate students from Dartmouth College.

The Cadwalladers admit they harbored some misgivings, both about changing their home and the character of their neighborhood.

“I wasn’t 100 percent certain I wanted to be a landlord, or share my

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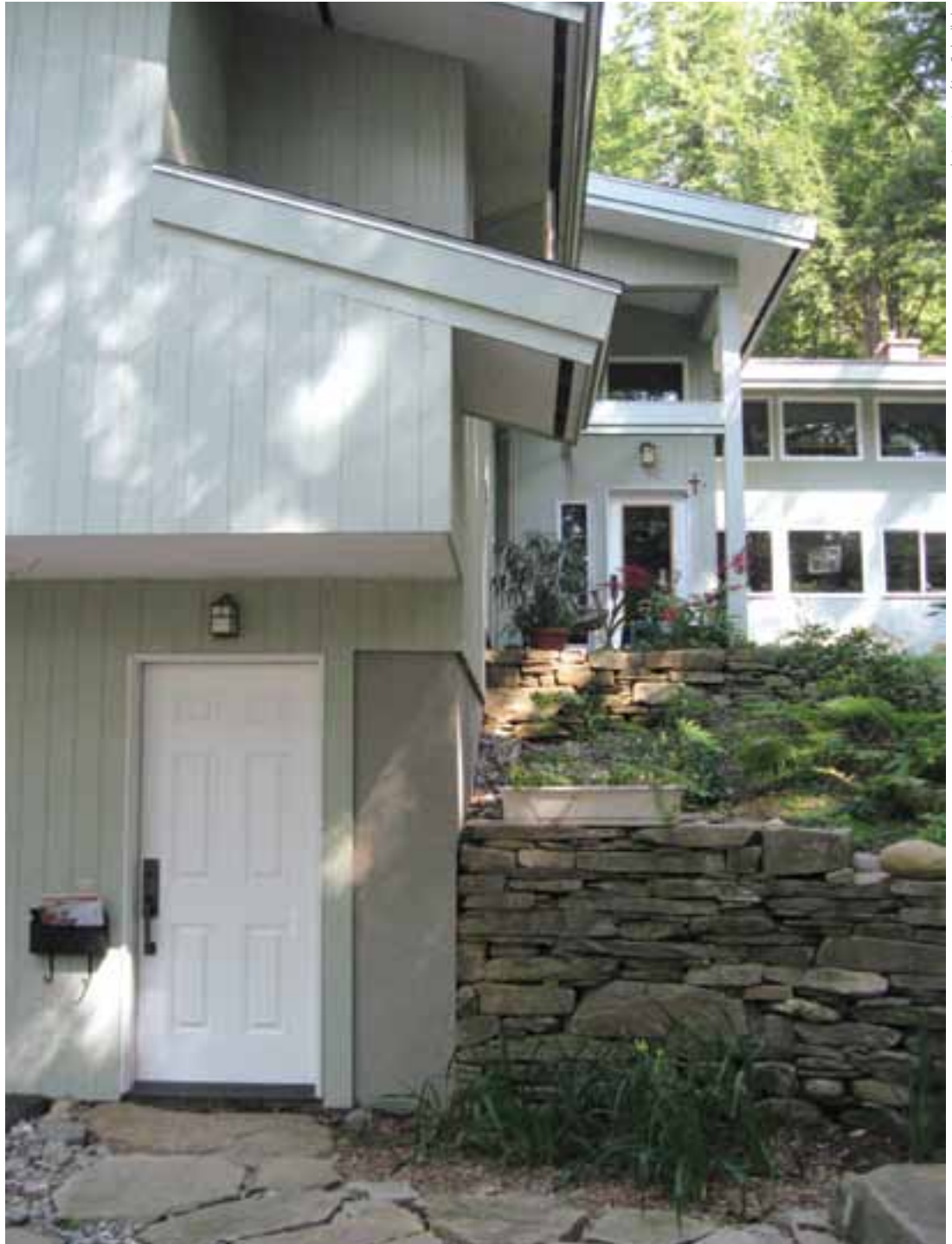


photo courtesy of Len Cadwallader

An apartment above the garage at the Cadwallader’s home in Hanover, N.H.

living space with another person, especially since I was recently retired and would be spending more time at home,” says Mary Ann. “And a lot of thought was given throughout the construction process to maintain the current standards of the neighborhood.”

Happily, their misgivings proved unfounded. Communicating with their neighbors and abiding by new zoning regulations in Hanover steered the Cadwalladers clear of any misunderstandings within the community. And if anything, their tenants have become welcome additions to their home.

“I think we have chosen our tenants well,” says Mary Ann, recalling the number of international students from Dartmouth who have taken up residence in their apartment. “We have had a chance to meet some wonderful people from around the world. And it’s actually great to go away now and then and know that there’s a trustworthy person in the house.”

Comfort in Numbers

For Judith Pettingell, also of Hanover, opening up her residence to accommodate an ADU was inspired by the hard reality of financial necessity. A retired art teacher who had lived in her home for more than 18 years, when Pettingell attempted to meet all of her expenses on her retirement benefits alone, she found her budget stretched too tight for comfort.

So she outfitted one of her son’s old bedrooms with a television, a small refrigerator and a microwave oven, and rented the space to a female student from Dartmouth College.

“My one stipulation is that I don’t want to share my kitchen,” Pettingell says. So, at first, she feared prospective tenants would balk at making their home in a space that didn’t include full kitchen facilities.

But that was more than five years ago, and since then, Pettingell has

experienced virtually no difficulty in finding occupants for that one bedroom. In fact, the response has been so positive, and the need for temporary housing around in the Upper Valley is so great, Pettingell now makes two rooms available in the finished basement of her home. She has expanded her rental area to include a small common room where tenants can watch television and prepare

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simple meals, and she has enjoyed watching tenants emerge from their rooms to take a stroll around her gardens or cook a steak on a propane grill.

Listing her rooms for rent through Dartmouth College, Pettingell says, “I literally receive calls from all over the world, 30 to 40 calls from places as far away as China and Europe.”

Of her tenants, Pettingell has nothing but good things to say, both about how their rental income augments her financial resources and how their very presence brings an added sense of security within the confines of her own home.

“I couldn’t live without them. My savings would be depleted,” Pettingell states matter-of-factly.

And although Pettingell may not become lifelong friends with each of her tenants, some of whom come to stay for as short as a few weeks, she takes comfort from the communal sensibility that having others in the house inevitably seems to create.

“I may not see them on a daily basis, but I know they’re there,” Pettingell explains. “We get to know one another’s likes and dislikes, special foods, favorite television shows, things like that. I would feel lonely now without this other activity in my house. I feel much safer when other people are around.”

A Few Words of Warning

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ADU into an existing home may be substantial, but even homeowners who have had success with ADUs wave a few cautionary flags.

Linda Jones of Enfield, N.H., started renting a one-bedroom apartment in her home years ago when she was a single mother struggling to make ends meet. She was in the midst of preparing to spend a year in Oslo, Norway, when she first took the plunge of becoming an on-site landlord.

"I needed the house to pay for itself," Jones recalls. "So I turned the ell into a small, furnished apartment and went looking for a tenant."

Jones' first attempt at being a landlord was not an entirely satisfactory experience. A young man and woman with a child showed up at her door without any references and no checking account and then accused her of being a racist when she declined to rent to them.

"I have had a couple of bad experiences," admits Jones. But that hasn't stopped her from renting the apartment. Even after she returned to Enfield from Norway, Jones says, "I continued to rent it because I needed the money." In fact, Jones continues to rent her ADU to this day, even now that her sons are adults and she owns her own business, Enfield Publishing and Distribution Co.

After all these years of leasing an apartment from within her own residence, Jones doesn't hesitate to offer one piece of advice: Choose your tenants carefully. "I'm not a social worker," Jones says. "I look for a tenant who wants me to solve just one problem: housing."

Nancy Smith, who owns Shaker Hill Bed & Breakfast in Enfield with her husband, Allen, rents a converted ell apartment on the same property. Like Jones, she, too, uses extreme caution in her choice of tenants. "You need to be careful about where you advertise," says Smith. "I would never just place an ad in the local newspaper. I always go through Dartmouth College."

Seeking tenants through the college, however, doesn't necessarily mean your best tenant will be a student. Smith

and Jones say they have had success renting ADUs to a string of travelling nurses who come to work temporarily at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center.

And back in Hanover, Pettingell once rented a room to a man who needed a place to stay while he attended his daughter's basketball games.

The bottom line on tenants, says Jones, is pretty simple: "Look for people who have something to do with their lives."

Don't Avoid Your Neighbors

But before anyone renovates a home to include an ADU and hangs out a for rent sign, they should heed the advice of Hanover resident, local architect and newly elected state representative Bernard Benn.

"First thing you do is talk to your neighbors," says Benn. "People should not automatically assume that their neighbors will come on board with their plans. They may have some valid concerns. If every house on the block included an ADU, you would definitely

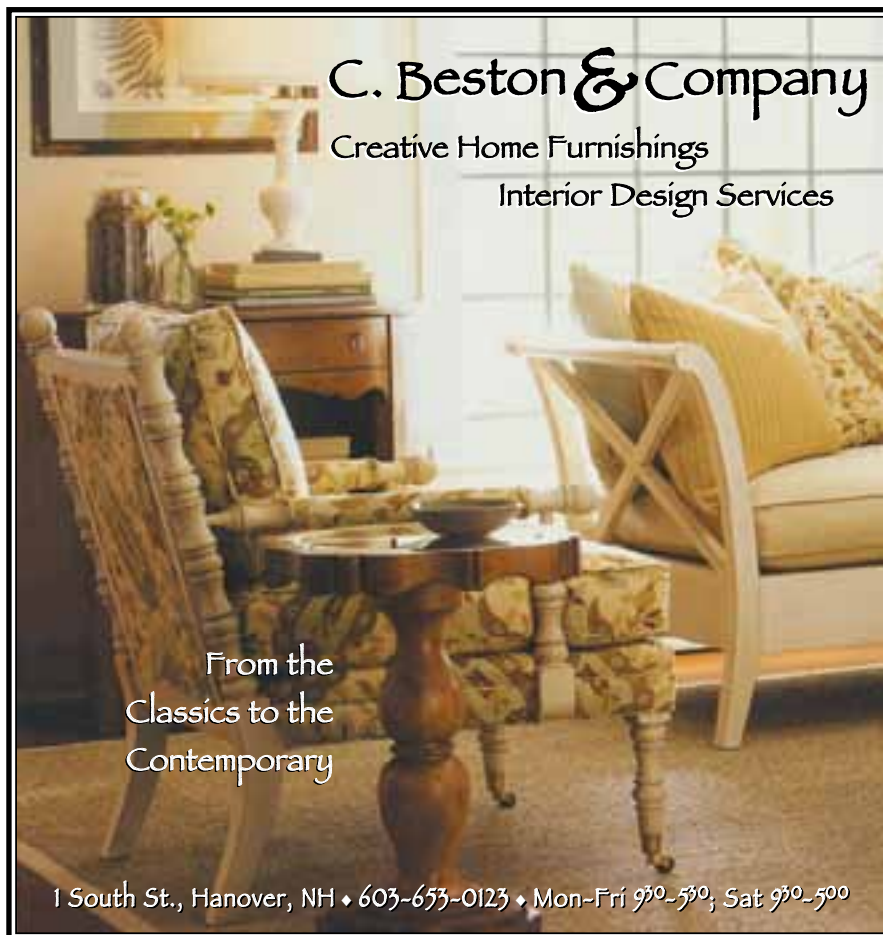
change the character of the neighborhood. So you need to listen to what your neighbors' concerns are."

You also need to know the rules and regulations set in place for ADUs by your town's zoning board, says Benn.

"Over the years, the ordinances on ADUs seem to have eased up considerably," Benn says, "but there are still some things you need to make sure you comply with. Otherwise, you run the risk of being closed down."

Last but not least, and just because he is, after all, an architect with experience in both residential and small commercial construction, Benn urges anyone considering a renovation to an existing structure to consult an architect, even if they think they don't need one.

"There's always a benefit to be gained from seeking the advice of someone who understands space differently than you do," says Benn. "So, please, don't put in the apartment and then call in an architect to fix a problem. Call the architect first!" ■



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